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THE TOTAL CONTEXT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

I

IN my paper on "A Neglected 'Context' in 'Radical Empiricism'"[1] it was assumed with the latter that for our present philosophy, at any rate, the former dualism of 'thought' and 'thing' can no longer hold, that entities must give way to empirical relationships, or, in other terms, must be given their contextual equivalents in experience. However, it was objected that radical empiricism wrongly identifies consciousness with a special context. It was then suggested that we make the attempt to supply the experiential equivalent of the transcendentalist's position, seemingly so much at variance with an empirical philosophy.

Let us begin *ab ovo* by noting the difference between an object thought of as thing, process, or event in the outer world, and the same object thought of as experienced 'in consciousness.' To illustrate the first, the ink-stand upon my desk was for me a moment ago hardly more than a 'mere' that, yet certain things were noted as belonging to it—form, color and some of its spatial relations to other objects. This group or special context of objects, with reference to which the object of attention gets its momentary empirical character, is a system of limited but homogeneous qualities and relations, homogeneous inasmuch as all are in one context, and so, together with the thing, felt by me to exist in a physical universe. I can extend this system of relationships practically at will while preserving, nevertheless, its homogeneous character. Besides the immediate and obvious qualities of color or form I can add weight, density, capacity for absorbing or reflecting light, atomic constitution, etc. To be sure, I could not thus extend the context without passing almost immediately from the sensuously 'real' to the 'ideal,' but that is a matter of no moment here, since for us ideas and things are merely empirically distinct classes of experiences.

Now as long as the object continues to fit in and cohere with the contexts with reference to which it is known, consciousness and context are one, and our state is one of pure object-mindedness. If for convenience we limit the contents of the momentary experience to a very few objects, ink-stand (object of attention), weight (recognized property), percept of desk and images of earth, moon, body (context), the new item of knowledge, 'weight' is taken to be the equivalent, substitute or representative of this defining context, and the latter is the empirical 'subject' of the experience. Unless we are explicitly conscious of self as a trend of particular memories, etc.—a thing which happens more often in our social relations with our fellow men—the subject is simply *the defining context.* Now ordinarily we say that, although the object is characterized by means of these contexts, the former is 'in' or 'present to consciousness.' However, besides the object and the emphatic context there is nothing in the experience of the moment but the indefinite fringes or unused associable material. As, therefore, we are to abandon the notion of consciousness as an entity, and as it seems impossible to identify it with a special context, we must, I believe, find in the fringes the explanation. Accordingly, *the thought that this Total Context comprising the neglected experiences, constitutes a system which would be pertinent in the final definition of the object is the thought of the object as in or present to consciousness, and consciousness itself arises through the fact that there are two possible subjects or subject-contexts in any experience to which the object may be referred.* One of these is the special context which defines the object, giving to it its specific character; the other is the Total Context which defines it only as object of 'consciousness.' The Total Context with its changing content, a system to which any and every object or relation may or, as the idealist says, must be referred, is 'consciousness.' If the reference is not made, *i. e.,* if the object is not counted with the larger context, so far as the present experience goes we and the objects we think or feel are one; if the object gets presented also to the Total Context, consciousness is concerned. If the Total Context is thought of as within the span of a new system we are aware that we are conscious, that is, we are self-conscious. From this point of view consciousness and self-consciousness are essentially one, self-consciousness being merely the explicit recognition of the Total Context as a primary defining system or ultimate subject of the experience.

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[1] THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS, Vol. II., No. 15, p. 400.

Let us call the latter system X, representing its contents (ill-defined objects, real or ideal, together with masses of organic sensation and feeling) by the symbols a—b—c—d—e—f—g, etc. If, further, we call the object O, and by A—B—C denote the special context (or, let us say, system Y), which is more or less within the field of attention, and by which the object acquires its definite character, the above conception of consciousness will take a form somewhat like this:

System X
╱|a–b–c–d–e–f–g · · ·|
O
╲|A–B–C · · ·|
System Y

in which A—B—C are emphasized portions of system X. In this case we have a system within a system represented by

System X
O — |–a–b–c–d–e–f–g.
System Y

Borrowing features from Dr. Marshall's diagrams,[2] we may represent the given experience of the moment as in Fig. 1, where ● = clearly defined, and O = undefined.

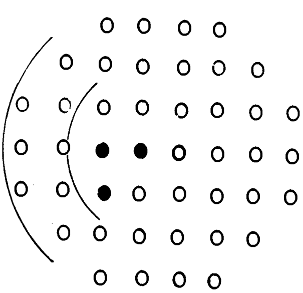

FIG. 1.

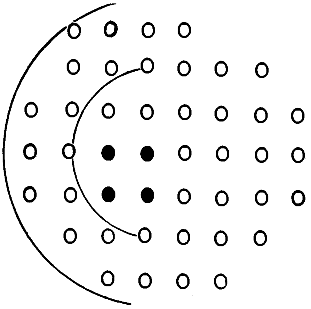

FIG. 2

In Fig. 2, a group of elements is becoming focal as an object, although it has as yet no definite character, remaining a mere 'that,' which is here represented by the arcs partially enclosing emphatic elements with their contiguous circles or associates. In proportion, however, as the object appears in consciousness as a definite thing with properties and relations, it is no longer confused with the other contents of consciousness, but is definitely a whole in contrast with the defining context, as in Fig. 3. Finally, consciousness would be a function of the relation which obtains between the object and the enclosing systems, the marginal elements outside system Y now in their turn constituting the larger system X, as in Fig. 4. The object, when counted in with system Y, acquires further specific character, which is, of course, dependent upon this context; but, if it is also counted with system X, it is 'present in consciousness,' the ultimate subject of any experience.

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[2] 'The Field of Inattention—The Self,' THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS, Vol. I., No. 15, pp. 394 ff.

In the above diagrams the circles, which represent systemic content, should never be more than arcs of different curvature, for the reason that no one of these systems is ever complete. Not only is the Total Context never complete, but the defining context, in spite of its clearly marked systemic character, is never sharply to be distinguished from the environing contexts of marginal content, while finally the object itself is always felt to be more than it appears as mere presentation.

If now we consider for a moment the nature of conception and judgment, we shall find, I think, suggestion for the view that any definite experience in which the 'feeling of wholeness' is predominant derives this character from the fact that it is a minor representation which repeats in essential features the Total Context. The concept, which may be structurally a generalized or particular image, functionally represents groups of experiences and is, therefore, treated as substitutional. But these contexts of which the concept is functionally representative include wide tracts of undifferentiated content. Does not its dynamic power—the feeling that although we have grasped the meaning of our image and found it in some sense a whole, it nevertheless reaches forward to other relations with other content—does not this arise from the fact that it is a minor system which repeats the essential characteristics of the Total Context with its broader margins? It is the environing 'fringe' which constitutes the representative aspect of the concept, and the 'pull of the fringe' which is 'relational feeling.' In judgment also we are under the control of an ideal complex or system of which subject and predicate are momentarily regarded as aspects, and with refer-

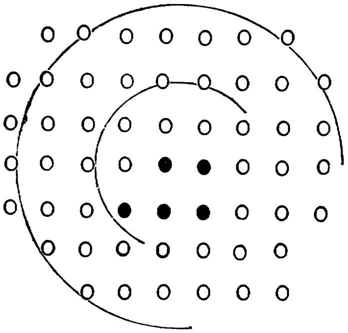

FIG. 3

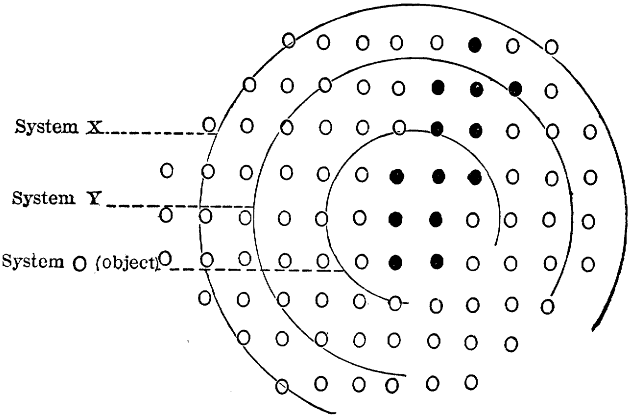

FIG. 4

ence to which the relation is affirmed or denied. Thus, if there is truth in the above suggestions, the foregoing processes from the ideal complex which accompanies judgment—and reasoning—to the percept itself appear as variations of the Total Complex, the variations being due to the predominance of this or that class of sensations, the extent of the marginal field included within the system, the special contexts which enter into it, etc., while the Total Context appears as the fundamental, determines the form or furnishes the 'pattern' for the minor systems.

We may now turn to some prominent characteristics of the Total Context. First, in so far as we are 'conscious' it is not simply a fringe, but in some sort a system, for it subordinates all other relations to itself; at least we think of it as making a difference to the object, all the difference there is between thing and consciousness of a thing. Second, as regards content, the Total Context does not differ from the minor systems. If the percept and images in the previous illustration served somehow to bring to mind the recognition of 'weight,' then another object, say the thought of Mars or Venus, although homogeneous with the others, since the objects are implied in a physical system of mutually attracting bodies, is, if excluded from the defining context, referred to another universe, a universe of undefined relationships which puts all the difference between the physical and the conscious. In the experience of the moment let but one element remain undefined, neglected and forgotten, it defines itself by means of a larger system, making its law known to you in your recognition that the object with its property *is*, but that you are *conscious* of it. Consciousness is the very quintessence of scepticism, for the Total Context, when you neglect it, comes back upon you with the assertion: I and I only am the genuine subject of any experience, the original and natural world order by means of which your object must ultimately be defined. Your defining context is partial and artificial; your object as characterized by it is, therefore, not the object as it is. Thus a third characteristic of the Total Context is its essentially purposive character. Particular association groups represent to a greater or less degree habitual lines of reaction with reference to the object, while purpose, as synonymous with end, is simply developed consciousness, the more than commonly persistent grasp of this Total Context in the form of defining system, while its content remains for the most part in the field of inattention.

The chief systemic characteristic of the latter is the simultaneity, the togetherness in time of its constituent objects, or, as I shall say here, their timeless unity. Since its content is made up largely of relatively persistent groups of organic sensations, its form changes slowly when compared with particular association groups. As now we have assumed that consciousness means the presence of the object to two systems of experiences, the one a partial, the other a Total Context, and as we may further suppose that, viewed temporally, the contents of these systems have differing rates of change,[3] certain elements will always be common to both, and these elements, counted in with both systems, will constitute the felt identity and timelessness of consciousness. Thus the subject of any experience is always felt to be timeless, as subject, the object temporal and changing, while, if the former is itself made object, its contents are felt to flow.

Thus far we have been concerned with consciousness as subject or unity in experience. It is the 'I think' which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects and to which Professor James devotes a few lines, dismissing it as the 'I breathe, which actually does accompany them.' It means simply objects, but objects in a unique relationship, which, as I believe idealism rightly claims, is the type after which we pattern all other relations. If now we abandon the entity concept and the metaphysical separation of ideal from real, terms such as 'subject,' 'transcendental ego' and the like, serve only to mark off this unique though empirical relationship from all other forms, mechanical, chemical or what not, which enter into our experience. Thus the idealist and transcendentalist lose their subjectivism. The issue is now between competing types of equally objective relationship, and the problem of idealism *versus* opposing mechanicalistic systems becomes: shall the world which we conclude to call real be interpreted in terms of system X or system Y, the one termed 'conscious,' the other 'mechanical'? Leaving this larger question as foreign to our inquiry here, we may return to the conception of the self of attention which radical empiricism identified with consciousness.

II

THE TOTAL CONTEXT AND THE INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

It is evident that the term 'my consciousness' is ambiguous, comprehending as it does two concepts which represent disparate systems of objective content, for the 'my' signifies 'biography,' 'consciousness' a function present when the object is counted with system X. My *consciousness,* as knower, or subject, is system X, a relation in and of things; *my* consciousness is 'a particular series of experiences run together by certain definite transitions,[4] memories, opinions, percepts, identified with a particular material organism. The two, subject and biography, are not necessarily identical. How then do they come to be identified? Why is it that instead of regarding consciousness as a type of relationship present in things, we assign to it a purely subjective function, identifying it with the conceptual self of the individual, contrasting it with spatial, mechanical and all other forms of relationship in a supposedly alien material world? It seems to me that this admits of two answers, the first ethical, the second psychological. First, in so far as the larger purposive system of the present experience is felt to be the outcome, continuation and fulfillment of incidents, plans, purposes which I have owned as part of my particular self, I as an individual and this Total Context are genuinely one. As one may step from the ground upon moving steps or upon a moving sidewalk, becoming part of a particular mechanical system, so the individual may, through the adoption of purposes, felt to be the continuation of his past self, identify himself as an individual with the present purposive context, becoming part of an objective system. In the second place, the Total Context and the 'biography' of the individual *look alike* and are, therefore, treated as one. For those objects, whether percepts or ideas, which make up the fringe of neglected content, are in all respects like those other ideal objects which form the self-group. The former, just because attention has neglected them, are vague and indefinite, and thus readily commingle with the self-group which is comprised chiefly of ideational content and is, furthermore, the most persistent of association-groups. Hence the fringe of the larger system is always vaguely felt to be a continuation of *my* self, and consciousness is mistakenly conceived to be a purely subjective form of relationship. Consequent upon this misconception is, I believe, our ordinary failure to recognize purpose as a category applicable to those groups of experiences, actual and possible, which constitute the system of external nature; but a discussion of this is obviously impossible here. In its stead, however, a word may be said in conclusion. If we may suppose that the transcendentalist had a genuine experience, and if we could interpret this in conformity with present knowledge of the structural content of entities which have had their day and are passing, Kant's Copernican change would really be the analogue of the great astronomer's physical standpoint. For it would then appear, not that objects conform to the intuitions and categories of an inscrutable inner self, but that all objects, ourselves included, conform to a type of objective relationship termed 'subject' and 'consciousness,' which we treat substantively as 'inner,' and for practical and methodological purposes correlate with physical processes having determinate connections of their own.

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[3] Which does not mean necessarily that time has an independent reality. That time itself is meaningless apart from the timeless I have endeavored to show in 'An Interpretation of Some Aspects of the Self,' *Philosophical Review,* Vol. XII., No. 1.

[4] Professor James's definition of 'a mind.' This JOURNAL, Vol. I., No. 21, p. 566.

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A FUNCTIONAL VIEW OF NATURE AS SEEN BY A BIOLOGIST[1]

THE following outline makes no claim to originality of treatment. It represents merely the attempt of a naturalist without philosophical training to formulate in his own vernacular certain current philosophical views in form suited to the practical requirements of his own scientific thinking. Terms are used as far as possible in the ordinary untechnical sense with no attempt to conform them to the historical usages of metaphysics. The obvious impossibility of eliminating traditional philosophical implications surely need not deter us from the attempt to do so!

We are accustomed to say that all things which constitute the materials of physical science are known to us only through their properties, *i. e.*, their behavior. It would accord more directly with experience to say that the behavior is the thing so far as known. Any substance back of the behavior is a postulate which certainly has not the merit of inductive proof. The new physics and the new chemistry (the boundary between them is breaking down) are coming to dynamic forms of statement, and Ostwald even goes so far as to affirm that the concept of the atom as brute matter is a metaphysical perversion which has exerted a most mischievous depressing influence on the progress of science. And certainly, in the organic realm, the higher we go in the scale the more clearly does function or behavior stand out as the criterion of our definitions.

That things do not exist apart from their function or behavior is a conception which possibly will not commend itself at first blush to students of physical science, though it is one of the fundamentals of biology. Our customary definition of protoplasm as living substance, for example, is a case in point. Dead protoplasm is a contradiction of terms. It ceases to be protoplasm as soon as the distinctively vital modes of function are replaced by others. This is easily recognized because the vital modes are constructive and conservative, while the inorganic modes which replace them upon the death of the organism are destructive agencies, so that a change

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[1] Read before the Philosophical Club of the Ohio State University, January 16, 1905.